

Loren Fisher's Books on Job
A Paper for the Convocation on Job
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By John T. Wilcox

Professor Fisher is a scholar of Semitic languages and literature, and I am not. But I have previously read many Job scholars; if that entitles me to speak at all on such matters, then I testify that I found his translations, word-by-word analyses, and scholarly notes (to be) full of insights into the details of the Book of Job. I appreciated his rich sense of the ancient Middle Eastern world, which is far greater than my own. I learned from him.

I did not meet Fisher "in the flesh" before today; but the scholar who comes through in his Job books is to me admirable and likeable. In these writings, he is learned; imaginative; courageous; honest and unpretentious; and he is a good communicator. These are qualities I respect, and their conjunction in one person is rare in the scholars I have known.

So it is a pleasure to join with the rest of you in honoring him today. And I am delighted that it was the first of my most influential philosophy teachers, John Cobb, who invited me to take part in this Convocation.

My respect for Fisher does not mean that I agree with him on everything, of course; and we disagree on some important issues concerning the Book of Job. I will focus, perhaps one-sidedly, on these disagreements. If I can make clear what some of these are, perhaps I can stimulate some fruitful reflection and conversation.

First, however, I note some agreements. He and I agree about some minor and some major points. I do not object in theory to his removal of the Satan from the Joban prologue, though from a literary point of view the book is richer with that folksy element there; and it helps us to date the book. I do not greatly object to his removal of the Hymn to Wisdom; it is a beautiful psalm, it could have been written by the author of the theophany, and it helps in interpreting the theophany; but it does not sound right in anyone's mouth before the voice from the whirlwind. And I can't find any place where it fits well. And like most scholars I do not see that the Elihu speeches add anything to the book; so I'm happy to say goodbye to Elihu.

On more important issues: I agree with Fisher that in the debate, the friends are mistaken; Job wins the debate, so to speak, and orthodoxy is defeated. God does not always reward the righteous, protect the weak, or punish the wicked. I suspect that's what Job and Fisher mean when they sometimes say there is no justice—though if so that is an exaggerated and misleading way to put the point. This may be also what Fisher means when he says the God of the friends is dead; or when he says *that* God does not exist; or when he says there are two Gods in the book, one of which is dead; but again, these seem to me troubling ways to express the point, and ways I cannot justify from the Joban text.

Fisher and I also agree that orthodoxy is not only false; it is cruel—“nasty,” he puts it (78n)¹—and indeed cruel to the suffering, who are precisely the people the righteous man is supposed to help. This means that orthodoxy is deeply immoral, or wicked, as well as false; so Fisher and I conclude, and so the Joban author concluded. The religious ethics in this book, basically the ethics of the great prophets, is at war with the theology of the friends’ orthodoxy.

I agree also with Fisher, and with Archibald MacLeish before him, that after one is released from the grip of orthodoxy, the thing to do is to stop demanding that the universe be what it is not, and to take practical and emotional steps to make one’s own life, and the life around one, as good as one can in the circumstances. That is, the available solution to the problem of evil is not theoretical but practical. What Fisher says is sensible: “We cannot hope to find justice, but we can find ways to build peaceful and loving relationships for ourselves and our communities. We could start by helping the widow and the orphan, by caring for the homeless and the starving, and by healing the wounds that we have inflicted.” (109) What Job’s wife says is sensible, in the new epilogue Fisher creates: “[W]e can...remember our children, call forth their names at this tomb, and try to build new lives out of these ruins....[M]arvel at the wonders of this world though it is also full of suffering....[T]here has to be between us a shout and a hopeful song of love and support.” (101) What MacLeish had Job’s wife say was sensible: “Then blow on the coal of the heart and we’ll know.../ We’ll know...” (101; I’m assuming she doesn’t mean “know” in any sense that negates the ignorance theme of the theophany.)

However, I believe that these conclusions Fisher and I draw are better supported by the biblical Book of Job than they are by the book called *Job II*² that Fisher constructs. Also, I think many of the problems he sees in the biblical Book are solved by his proposals in the wrong ways. And other problems he sees there do not strike me as serious problems in the first place. Of course my views on these matters are based on the elaborate interpretation of the biblical Book of Job that I have already worked out and published, and I cannot summarize many of its details here; nor would it be appropriate to do so. We are trying to focus today on Fisher’s proposals, and that’s mainly what I’ll do below.

Let’s consider the *theophany*. Fisher takes it *out of* his favored *Job II*, and places it in his *Job I*, the hypothetical older book he criticizes. But this means that he no longer has the theophany available to support the conclusions he wants to draw. My view is that what he wants would be supported by it. For example, he says, “Some of our suffering results from the fact that we live in a world with accidents, storms, famine, and disease.” (13) So we do; we are vulnerable to all of these natural events and forces. He quotes from *Year of Wonders*: “Perhaps the Plague was neither of God or of the Devil, but simply a thing in Nature, as the stone on which we stub a toe.” (R 15)³ But the theophany implies as much: what I call the weakness theme there is precisely this point. The voice from the whirlwind lists natural force after force which humans cannot control, and some of those forces are dangerous even to confront. This is one of the three main themes in the theophany. The reader of the biblical Book of Job has God Himself telling Job about

man's weakness, in relation to the rest of nature; but what does the reader of *Job II* have to prepare him for this conclusion? Nothing that I can see. Another example: the wife in Fisher's epilogue tells Job to "marvel at the wonders of this world though it is also full of suffering." But what prepares Job's wife to see this point, in Fisher's *Job II*? Nothing that I can find. On the other hand, the reader of the biblical Book has the theophany describing a multiplicity of created beings in terms that can only be interpreted as praise for them; they *are* "wonders of this world," just what Fisher really needs to support the transformation at the end. And I think this is a second major theme in the theophany that Fisher displaces. And what I regard as the third theme in the theophany, the ignorance theme, is also something Fisher sympathizes with: in *The Minority Report*, his Jonathan says (54), "Who knows why there is suffering? The three friends think they know, but I hope my Job shows that they are wrong in every way." I think this exaggerates what you can reasonably conclude from *the dialogues*. But *the theophany* does imply that human beings are not capable of determining how the world ought to be constructed or governed, and hence *why* there is suffering, in a teleological sense.

I don't think Fisher has meditated sufficiently on the deep difficulty posed by the bitterness of a person like Job.⁴ I have known such a person; I hope the rest of you have not. Such a person is in a profound grip of anger at the universe, anger that it is not the way he thinks it ought to be. Such a person, like Job, has a close kinship with the friends; he and they *agree* on how God *ought* to govern the universe; they only disagree on whether God is living up to His obligations, as they conceive them. To me, Fisher, like MacLeish before him, fails to appreciate the difficulty of the spiritual transformation required of Job at the end. I think the theophany helps—I think all three of its major themes help—and I don't see that Fisher has provided any similar help in his *Job II*.

Also: the theophany makes more sense after the dialogues than it does where Fisher places it, in *Job I*. The reason is that it is a put-down, an humbling, of Job. Now one can see how the Job of *Job II* needs to be humbled. He says terrible things about God. He says, "He [God] mocks [the] despair of the innocent" (9:23); and Fisher comments, "It would be difficult to say anything that would be worse about this God." (64n) Absolutely right. (That's what I suspect is "cursing God," which in the prologue seems the crux of the story.) And that's why I think it's *this* Job, not the Job of *Job I*, who gets God's rebuke in the theophany.

The problem here is that the Job of Fisher's *Job I* has not said anything very startling; yet Fisher lets Yahweh blast him with the theophany. Fisher's response to this complaint, I guess, is that "even the orthodox Job goes too far in his demands on his God. This is especially true in chapters 29-31." (17) How so? I see this: "In chapter 29 Job spends too much time thinking about the 'good old days.'" (26n) I don't think he does; but even if he does, that hardly calls for the blast from the whirlwind. I do see now—after I gave Fisher a draft of these remarks—that it's in Chapter 31 that Job says he would "like a prince" approach God (31:37b); that seems presumptuous. But what Job says in *Job II*, or in the book as we have it, seems to me *more* presumptuous, much more deserving of a rebuke from God.

I also think that the biblical *epilogue* can help Fisher reach the conclusions he wants; but he has put it into *Job I*, which he rejects. He says that if it were the friends who were suffering, Job would have two alternatives: “he could be nasty,” as they are to him; or “he could bring some comfort.” (78n) But in the epilogue, in fact, all Job’s brothers, and sisters, and former acquaintances, *did* bring him social, spiritual, and material comfort. The contrast between what they did, and what the friends of Job II had done, could not be clearer. So the biblical epilogue illustrates what Fisher wants. And Fisher is also concerned about equality between men and women, and about the slander that it is our birth from women that makes us imperfect. Again, the theophany and the epilogue speak to this, if you read them the way I do. In that terribly short epilogue the author goes out of his way to praise the beauty of Job’s daughters; and to list their highly sexual names; and to say Job gave them inheritances, with their brothers, a thing otherwise unknown in the Hebrew scriptures. What does this mean, except that we have here a revaluation of the value of sex and of woman? And what does it mean in the theophany that Behemoth’s sexual prowess is celebrated? Especially when we look back at the slanders on sex in the dialogues? I think the author of both of those writings knew very well what he was doing—and it is what Fisher wants to do.

Fisher really dislikes the biblical epilogue;⁵ but I suspect that is because he can only see in it something the dialogues implicitly demolish. I think we should interpret the epilogue in a way that fits what comes before it. The dialogues show that orthodoxy is false, that righteousness, which Job has, does not guarantee prosperity. Well, you might propose a new orthodoxy, an orthodoxy-plus; and you might say that righteousness, *combined with* the humility Job learns from the theophany, *does* guarantee prosperity. Perhaps that proposal is what Fisher sees in the epilogue. I don’t. I think the biblical author knew very well he could construct a set of *new* dialogues, analogous to the ones we have, refuting *that* notion. And the theophany would blast both sides of that new debate. So I interpret the epilogue symbolically. I think it means that there *is* a blessing, a “reward” so to speak, to be found in moving from the hubris and bitterness of the dialogues to the humility instilled by the theophany; and, of course, it also hints at the other points I just mentioned. But it does not mean that if you are righteous and also humble you will have a fence about you to protect you from a largely amoral nature.

Further, I think we can interpret the rebuke of the friends in the epilogue in a more plausible way than Fisher proposes. What is it they say that calls for rebuke? Since he puts the dialogues into *Job II*, he has to invent something offensive for them to say in *Job I*, and he proposes that they, like Job’s wife, asked Job to curse God and die. Notice that’s all *invented*; and if that’s the solution, why isn’t Job’s wife rebuked in the epilogue? No, I think they are rebuked for one of the things Job is rebuked for. They and he share the presumption that they understand how God should order and govern the universe; they just disagree with him about whether God is living up to His obligations, as they interpret them. The presumption is something for which they need to repent. They also need to repent for lying about what they see around them in their common world. Job told the truth about God, if that means about the world. (And in much of this book, the world and God are terribly close.) They lied about the world.

My other criticisms of Fisher touch on lesser issues, but they are still important, I think.

Fisher places Job's last lament and call for a trial, Job 27 and 29-31, into *Job I*, the part of the book he doesn't like. It seems to me they fit better in the book as we have it, *after* the dialogues. As Fisher says (20), some scholars think an older version of Job just had the Prologue and the Epilogue. For Fisher, "this has never made much sense." I guess his reasons are stated there, viz., [1] that "the 'friends' of Job are not the 'friends' of Job II who defend the orthodox faith. Also [2] I do not think the Job of Job II would ever pronounce the self-curses of Job 31, and...[3] he would not repent."⁶

I do not understand the first point here, about the friends. But the claims about "self-curses" and repentance seem very weak to me. Job progresses from pure acquiescence (in the prologue) to lamentation; and then to self-defense and attack; and then to willingness to be "cursed" if really guilty; and then, after God's assault, to repentance. I think all of these are plausible, indeed psychologically needed, transitions. By taking the dialogues out of *Job I*, Fisher makes the transition to a call for a trial opaque—for without the dialogues, there's no clear demand for God to be just, in the first place.

Fisher doesn't seem to see that the claims about God's justice all come in the *dialogues*; they aren't in the prologue, or even in the first lamentation, in Chapter 3. But the *rebel* Job wants God to be just, and in Chapter 31 he says he would be willing to be punished if he really were guilty of the various sins he lists there. The Job who appeals for a trial is a great advance—a spiritual/psychological advance we need—over the quiescent Job of the prologue; and he fits the debate about justice in the dialogues; he does not fit, or does not fit nearly so well, the mood of Job in the prologue.

One thing that disturbs Fisher, about the call for a trial, is that at some points Job says he would not trust God to judge him fairly. This does not bother me as much as it bothers Fisher. Job could well move from distrust to trust. And there are transitions in the opposite direction, or at least apparent inconsistencies; and it may be that some of Job's speeches have been altered a bit by pious copyists who wanted to make him sound orthodox from time to time. But, anyway, like many readers, I find that the vacillating, "self-contradictory" nature of Job's various speeches is psychologically plausible. As Fisher says about one of these points of tension, "Usually the poet's Job is not interested in prayer, but it is understandable that the person who is suffering can go back and forth on such an issue." (79n) Yes; and he can go back and forth on many issues. Moreover, it is rhetorically very effective to complain about God's injustice, and then make it clear that you would be willing to be punished if the punishment were just; it's the injustice, not simply the suffering as such, that Job complains about.

This bears on the double puzzle about Job 27:8-23: here Job seems to present the orthodox view, not his own attack on orthodoxy; and Zophar is strangely silent. Most scholars (Fisher cites Pope) think this should be Zophar's third speech, not Job's. Fisher leaves it in Job's mouth but says it is part of the hypothetical *Job I*, where Job has not yet

become a rebel. Obviously, this ameliorates the problem of why Job should express orthodoxy here. As for Zophar, Fisher says, “there may not be a missing speech” of Zophar; and that’s right, there *may* not be.

Still, which is the more plausible explanation? Fisher has to leave Zophar silent, with no reason given for the silence. This seems odd to most readers. He has to leave Job saying the sorts of things Zophar and his friends usually say. And he has that transition problem I don’t think he appreciates. What Job says in the prologue is not what the friends say in the dialogues, or what Job/Zophar says in the troublesome part of Chapter 27. In the prologue Job accepts whatever comes without any claim that God should distribute goods and evils according to merit or whatever; he accepts good and evil and praises Yahweh. He raises no issue of his righteousness or desert. Perhaps his wife does, in Chapter 2; but he does not. There is a progression from the totally accepting Job of the prologue, to the lamenting Job of Chapter 3, to the Job who has to listen to Eliphaz’s insults, to the indignant Job of the dialogues, and finally to the Job who asks for a fair trial for his case. I see no problem with this; in a dramatic work we expect progression, psychological movement. But there is no evidence elsewhere that the *early* Job would jump so far as to become like Zophar; in the preface and in Chapter 3 he is not. Fisher says the view of 27:8-23 “is the orthodox view.” But without this passage, there is no evidence that Job in Fisher’s *Job I* actually holds the orthodox view.

What do I conclude? I like Fisher’s translations and scholarly notes very much. As for our biblical Book of Job, it may be that it has had some kind of history in its composition, and it may be that the various parts of it originated from somewhat different sources. But as it stands it has a great deal of unity and a great deal of cogency. It is a wonderful work. I agree with Fisher that his constructed *Job I* is pretty unsatisfactory; but I don’t think his *Job II* is as great a work as the biblical book it is meant to replace.

Notes

¹This means p. 78, in one of the notes there, in *Who Hears the Cries of the Innocent?*

²I’m going to use italics for *Job I* and *Job II*, though Fisher does not, in *Who Hears the Cries of the Innocent?*

³This means p. 15 of *The Rebel Job*.

⁴I mean the Job of *Job II* or of the biblical Book of Job.

⁵I don’t understand why Fisher, in the Convocation discussion, seemed so surprised by my saying this. He wrote, about “The Poet who came up with Job II,” “If he had a Prologue, it would have expressed his purpose, and his Epilogue would be different, because *that is the part of Job I that is so unbelievable.*” (17, my italics)

⁶In 33n, Fisher repeats the second of these three claims: “The rebel Job...would never have uttered these self-curses.”
